

Balm 60

July 22
John

Christmas Sermon

Then said Jesus unto the Twelve, - Will ye
also go away?

Then Simon Peter answered him, Lord, to whom
shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life,

And we believe and are sure, that thou
art that Christ, the Son of the living God. -

John vi. 67-8. & 9 -

Brooklyn Dec 27. 1874.

The Circumstance which led to this brief dialogue - was that many of the disciples of Jesus - because they were unable to understand his sayings - had gone back - "and walked no more with him". -

It was by no means an uncommon occurrence in Judea - for the multitude to attend the preaching of some prophet; - or for great numbers to follow him about - from place to place; - some no doubt to listen to his teaching - but others and probably the majority ~~to~~ in the hope of beholding some marvellous work. - Thus it seems that while Jesus never sought to display whatever of exceptional power he may have had; - but used it only for the relief of distress; and then almost invariably accompanied its ^{exercise} ~~exercise~~ with a strict injunction not to publish it abroad; - Still the people who attended him - were always curious to see a sign from heaven. - I say - that whatever ^{else} may be thought of the New Testament record of miracles - it is evident - that Jesus

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himself played little symphonies upon them, but rather strove to keep them in the background; - while the mass of his disciples were continually craving them. - He wished them to be interested in his doctrine - and not - to be attracted to him solely by wonders. - They were impatient of his sermons - and waiting always for some miracle. -

According to the account - given by John, Jesus had just - been laboring severely to convey to them some idea of spirit; - by means of symbols and comparisons; - the only language in which the senses can approach to Ideality. -

Your fathers did eat - Manna in the wilderness and are dead. - he told them, - but whose will partake of me, shall never die - Thus did he attempt to teach them that they needed not - material but - spiritual food. - But they found it an hard saying, and drew back from him. - So sense-bound and literal were their minds, that they at once began to ask each other, will

This man give us his flesh to eat - and his
 blood to drink? - They knew what it meant - when
 they saw a cripple made whole - or the blind restored
 to sight - but ideas were entirely beyond their
 experience, and so they left him, - We can imagine
 the grief and disappointment ^{that} ~~which~~ must have
 well nigh overwhelmed him, - at this final proof
 that the multitude were unable to receive the
 great ideas in which was their salvation, - He
 had made it his sole mission & purpose in life
 to hold men back from the dangers upon which
 they were blindly rushing, and to show them the
 path to a nobler manhood, - but so soon as he
 left the incidental work of healing their bodily
 diseases, - and made the first attempt to open
 their eyes to the mental weakness & malady - out-
 of which their despair was originated - he failed
 to hold their attention, - The story is told of an
 aged & blind Scotchman, - ^{who was} ~~an~~ expert swimmer
 and ~~the~~ in earlier life - ^{had rescued many from} ~~the sea~~ ^{of}

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drowning - and who was led down to the river's
bank amidst a crowd which had gathered to
watch the last-struggles of a youth caught by
the current; that the old men cried out to be
allowed to plunge in, ^{to} save him, - and when they
restrained him because he could no longer see, -
he went away with the wildest grief, tearing his
arms and tearing his hair, - because he was
held back from the accomplishment of his great-
desire, - Thus ^{was} the giant-soul of Jesus, ^{though} confident-
of ^{his} ~~the~~ ability to rescue a world fast-sinking
beneath a swelling flood of gross materialism,
yet filled with ^a sorrow which at-times approached
almost to despair - because of his inability to
reach it, - Between the strong arm of his spiritual
truth, - and the ~~weak~~ heart of the race which
pleaded in faint-grasp for help, - was the waste
of man's ignorance and indifference, - across which
his arm could not reach, neither through it,
could it find its way, - He avoided all men

abstract statement of his ideas; he spoke to
 the people in parables; - he made use of a wealth
 of symbolism which the language and mental
 habits of his people rendered vastly more effective
 than amongst us; - as an expression of the
 highest truth; - he possessed a rare faculty
 for seizing upon some present or familiar object,
 such as a fig tree, or a flower - and making it
 illustrate his meaning; - and yet the people
 turned from him - seemingly no wiser than
 they came; - I do not mean to say that his touch
 was without influence; - or that the crowds were
 not ^{at} all attracted by his teaching; undoubtedly
 there was moving within the minds of the
 masses - forces of which they were but dimly
 conscious - and though the outward ear heard and
 did not understand - yet the words of Jesus
 aroused in them aspirations which afterward
 grew to consciousness; - There is evidence that the
~~multitudes~~ ^{multitudes} were held for the moment by his

impassioned eloquence - and I have no doubt
 that they ^{were} interested by his parables. -- Still the
 great meanings which he sought to convey,
 created no apparent impression upon the
 general mind. -- Nothing but a supreme faith
 in the power of truth - could have sustained
 Jesus throughout his ministry. -- and that this
 faith must often have been sharply tried, the
 incident which precedes my text, is witness. --
 When after simplifying, and illustrating his
 truth by incidents in their own history with
 which all were familiar - in order to bring
 some point of it to the level of every understanding,
 his hearers turned away - murmuring that this
 was an hard saying - how must his heart have
 sunk and his courage failed. -- and with
 what unutterable sorrow must he have
 turned to the Twelve - asking, Will ye also
 go away? -- One of the most tragic of
 all scenes - would be presented by a man in

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a strange country, - surrounded by friendly hosts -
anxious to minister to his wants, - yet suffering
and dying ~~from~~ ^{without the} inability to make his wants &
known. - But the tragedy of such a scene is infinitely
deepened and intensified - when it ^{is} the one, possessed
of an all absorbing desire to save the money - ^{but} who
cannot find the means of communicating to them
either their danger or its remedy. - Suppose that in
the dead of a moonless night, - you should ^{see} a railroad
train rushing on to certain wreck, - & and could
find no way in which to signal its peril; -

Your sensations would be something like those
which Jesus must have felt, - when men rejected
his precious truth - because they could not understand
it - and held uncheck'd their course to ruin. -

The Church has succeeded Christ - as the messenger
of reconciliation between God & man. - and so
this tragedy - though in a modified form is
being continually re-enacted. - I say in a modified
form, - because the Church has not that all embracing

love for mankind - which impelled Jesus to devote
every moment of time - and all the energy of his
nature - to the good of his fellows; - it has not that
keen moral sense - which revolts from every shade
of evil; - and seems as a terrible danger - what
to the ordinary mind, is only an unnoticable blemish
or fault; - And these shortcomings, as they render
the church more indifferent ^{than was Christ -} to the reception given
by the world to Christian truth - diminish its
sorrow when men reject it; - Still all sincere
Christians share the belief, that there is that in the
Gospel of Christ to be found nowhere else; - that
the world needs it for a guard from present and
future dangers; - and that when men turn away
from it they do so to their own hurt; - Believing
thus, the Church cannot but sorrow as Christ
did - that ~~the world~~ ^{so many} ~~are~~ ^{are} unable to find the great
meaning in his sayings; - and therefore, though
clothed among his nominal disciples, "walk
no more with him" - - The Church is not blind

With the fact that its own annals are stained with crime - or that beneath its shelter - the most unchristian characters sometimes take refuge. If it were, there are plenty, anxious to enlighten it as to the real state of the case. - But it is believed that no person is either so good or so bad. - That they are not made somewhat better by holding before them as a mirror the life of Jesus. -

Is it not then a course of anxiety to such as recognize some positive value in the Christian Religion, that they who have placed themselves before the world, - as disciples of Christ - should so lack insight into the character of their professed Master. - that neither in their lives or their speech does a single one of his great virtues find vivid portrayal?

Is it not almost enough to turn this Christmas festival into a time of ~~of~~ weeping and fasting - to transform all its brightness and pageantry into sackcloth and ashes, - when when we consider how sentimentalism and sensationalism have

place of Christian teaching?—
occupy the ~~Christian~~ pulpit;— how soon an
anti-Christian spirit— finds utterance from the
pulpit— and acceptance in the Pews?— It is sad
enough to see a man with this great storehouse
of inspiring ideas before him— devote himself to
the consumption of meaningless piles of rhetoric— or
to the successful delivery of funny or reciting stories.—
But of all pitiable sights— beneath the form of heaven—
the most moving of its kind,— is when the occupant
of a Christian pulpit lends himself to the
propagation of that flipspout— skepticism,— which
teaches that religion is much of a form— and that
if such a man as Jesus ever did live— many
greater and better men have lived also.— Surely
the man who occupies a place in society— merely
to prove that his place ought to be vacant—
can either respect himself or expect to be
respected.—

I am aware that for the turning away
of these modern disciples, the Church itself

is largely responsible. - It has so far departed from the method of Jesus which was to put his ~~own~~ ideas into the simplest language - and illustrate rather than define his meaning; that it has & seemingly taken delight in hiding the grain of essential truth within bushels of dogmatic chaff; - or couching it in definitions which can only be fathomed after a lifetime of special study. - Its arbitrary customs have indeed been posted plainly and conspicuously enough; - but it has forgotten that the meaning of these customs should be ^{so} ~~plainly~~ written that he who sees may read; - and has instead created a realm of mystery to which only the priesthood have been admitted; - It has so identified its interpretation of the gospels with the text itself - as to impress mankind with a belief that its barren scheme was Christianity itself; - and in a hundred other ways it has added to the native difficulty experienced by the natural man - in endeavoring to comprehend spiritual

truth - by hedging that truth about - with artificial barriers, - It has fallen under Christ's own rebuke, for it has shut-up the Kingdom of Heaven against men, - And yet, ~~that~~ as it has done this with a sincere though mistaken purpose, it shows Christ's grief, that men turn away from him, - I also as we believe the religion of Rome to be, both in theory and practice - one can but sympathize with the present Pope, - standing amidst the relics of a deposed power, and forced to watch the age as it recedes further & further from all that he regards as saving truth - The Christ in which he bids us believe, we reject; - but the Christ in which we put our faith, those whom we would teach, despise. There is at least this bond of sympathy between us, -

And yet however great may be the occasion for any branch of the Christian Church to remember, at this Christmas time, its failure to bring home Christian truth to the many

whom it fair would reach, surely there ^{are} is more
 than the Twelve, - multitudes more than all the
 disciples ^{which} ~~also~~ knew Jesus in the flesh - who will
 today echo this declaration that Peter made, - Thou
 hast the words of eternal life - and we believe &
 are sure that thou art that Christ - ~~that the~~
 son of the living God, - We & every one
 of us here can say it I think, heartily, - only
 because some part of its phraseology - ~~has~~ has been
 made the technical term of a theology in which
 we do not believe, - we have used carefully to
 separate our thought from the mere conventional
 ideas of Christ, - and define for ourselves, what
 it is to be a son of the living God.

One reason why the truths of the gospel
 though nominally received - have practically failed
 to acquire such power over the lives of men as
 they ought to possess - is ~~that~~ that they have been
 made incidental to - and not a vital part of
 the scheme of redemption. - It has been supposed

that Jesus left some moral precepts, in following which men might help to secure for themselves the favor of the almighty;—but if they chose to disregard the moral law of Christianity—there was still always open to them another and easier passage into heaven—through repentance and a change of heart.—Of what value could the words of eternal life be, to people who believed that by one act Jesus had conferred immortality upon the race, and that the priest could at any time grant them the benefit of that act.—Salvation is indeed made a very simple matter—when it ^{merely} ~~simply~~ depends upon finding ^{the} way to the heart of an avuncular priesthood.—or may be gained by crying out to God under the stress of some great fear that all past iniquities are repented ~~of~~.—Every one knows how easy it is to reform—in the presence of danger.—how at such times all baser motives and desires sink out of sight—and good resolutions crowd into the mind in saintly troops.—

and if such a reformation will suffice, - no-one is likely to ~~stand~~ ^{brave} the infinite pain & trouble that it costs to reform in the midst of pleasure and ease. - Thus it has transpired that those words of eternal life, to which the Twelve so eagerly listened, and afterward imparted to succeeding generations, - have been ~~practically~~ ^{practically forgotten} ~~and~~ ~~as~~ as of minor importance - except as ~~some~~ particular texts have been used to support some special dogmas, - until it would be much to say, that for the great majority of those who depend upon Christ for salvation, - the volume of the gospels has lost life and meaning -

We then who have laid aside the theology that has thus vanished, - ought to be fully prepared to answer with Peter, Thou hast the words of eternal life. - As we have given up the Christ who by his atoning blood ~~purchases~~ purchases pardon for our sins, - the only Christ who can have any present mission to our hearts, is he who by his ^{teaching} ~~life~~ ~~and~~ leads us out of sin & death. - We are accustomed

to lament when evidence comes to us that they
 who ought to sustain him - have by word & deed
 denied the Christ - before men. - But we ought rather
 to rejoice, - as thinking that thereby a great super-
 stition has been weakened, unless we believe that his
 truth occupies the place heretofore given to his
 person. - To justify ourselves as his disciples, we
 should even suspect that judgement which we so
 freely pass upon other teachers, - and if his sayings
 seem dark and unmeaning to us - instead of passing
 them by as not worthy our consideration - we should
 instinctively feel that we are at fault: not they -
 and should never cease trying to fathom their
 deeper meaning. - These are people who are
 impossibly shocked at any word which seems
 to set a human limit to the profusions of Jesus,
 who are loud in their professions that his are
 the words of eternal life, - and yet who - when
 you quote to them passages of the Sermon on the
 Mount - maybe brought to confess that they do

not understood their meaning, - never seriously
 tried to do so, - and judge it not of momentous
 importance that they should, - I would have
 such people see that of all others they deny Christ
 most emphatically since they turn away from
 that truth which he could most that men
 should receive, - They might say or do what
 they pleased to his person - and he cared nothing.
 but when men so despised his teaching that
 they would make no effort to understand it,
 then indeed was he troubled, - I believe Christ
 to have been a man - & nothing but a man
 such as we might be if we could live out
 the noblest life within us, - such as our
 children's children in some remote generation
 will be, - but I also believe that human as
 he was - his were the words of eternal life, -
 and I claim that they who with some
 definite idea of the meaning of his words
 can say this, - give him a far more important

place in history - and bring him into closer relations with their every day lives - Then they who ~~deify~~ deify him, but take no trouble to fathom his thought, - It is at least apparent that Christians who do not believe that his death was an atonement for their sins, - ~~have~~ can find him of no present value except through the study of his work -

Let me say a few words regarding the other point, - the historic significance of Christ's life. -

The old scheme of religion upon which the Church of Rome was built - and from which the Protestant world is just beginning to free itself, could, properly speaking attach no meaning to the life of Jesus, - except that it was a life of suffering and ended in a violent death, - - What he did or said or was, - could be no matter of its concern, - save that he suffered enough to pay the penalty of all human sin, - This is only another way of saying that his life had no meaning in or influence

upon ~~human~~ ^{earthly} history, - but - was only designed
 to affect the records of heaven, - Then might be
 just - what they were before, the stream of events
 might - keep its old accustomed course, - Jesus
 had only opened the gate of heaven - and fixed
 upon some few ceremonies as the condition of
 entrance, - But in point of fact - Jesus is the
 central figure in all ^{history of the western world} ~~the history~~ since his time, -
 He has had a giant influence, not easily to
 be overestimated, ~~upon~~ in shaping the course it
 has taken, - This can only be explained ^{under} ~~after~~ the old
 beliefs - by supposing that he did much more than
 was required of him, - A more rational supposition
 however, would be that Jesus did just - what - was
 required of him, - but - if we are to make such
 a statement we must gain some broader
 conception of his mission, and what - was
 designed to be the result of his life. -

St. Paul says - Now is Christ - risen from the
 dead & become the first fruits of them that

slept, - and I know of no better way to express
the plan of Christ in history than to say that
he was the "first-fruits" of a nobler manhood, -

The Jew who planted a vineyard, - waited patiently
and expectantly till the first branches of grapes
ripened upon the tender vines. - These he
would by no means put to his own use, but
devoted them to God who had blessed his labors,
and made himself joyful in anticipation of a
full harvest the succeeding year. - Now consider
that this custom was instituted when the culture
of the vine was new ^{to the Jew} ~~to the Jew~~, - when he who
planted knew not certainly what the soil and
climate would produce - and you have its
significance. - We must understand that he
labored in uncertainty of the result - and we
see in ~~the~~ ^{his} gratitude to some higher Power,
when he found his field ~~at~~ productive, the
motive which led him to dedicate the
first-fruits to God. -

So the whole Jewish nation had planted the seed of righteousness, and watched and waited and predicted, the Messiah who should spring out of it, - More wonderful than any prophecy, and stronger evidence of ~~the~~ a providential guidance over the course that shaped Christianity, is the constancy with which that nation clung to its faith in God and aspiration after holiness, - There is nothing like it elsewhere in all history, - Surrounded by warlike and powerful neighbors - Judea was the scene of almost-constant carnage, - Across her territory marched all the great armies by turns to reach the others, - Her cities were spoiled and sacked again and again - her Holy Temple was desecrated; her people sold into captivity, - and yet through all the trials of sorrow & terror & wrath - warning from her prophets by their adversities - arises the constant song - Holiness belongeth to God, The Lord will build Jerusalem. -

The student of history must believe that among no other people on the face of the earth could Jesus have been born. - It is only when the mind of a race is bent in one direction, - when for long years it has been restless with a definite longing - and has struggled from one generation to another to meet that want - that at length the genius is born which meets its need, -

So of this ceaseless, almost-miraculous aspiration after a more righteous humanity - which had filled his forefathers - Christ was at length born the first fruits, - His own time knew him not - for it had looked to see something different, - But ~~his~~ the memory of his life nevertheless remained with succeeding ages - the seal of a promise that men do not toil and weep and suffer in vain to lift the race into diviner estate, - but always with a sure and certain possibility before their eyes, - That humanity which has produced

one such nature as that of Jesus, has shown of what it is capable. - Ours is precisely the promise given to the husbandman, that not only one or two more but a son like him may be produced as the reward of careful nurture and cultivation.

It is impossible to estimate the immense influence of such a promise upon all Christian peoples. -

Though men have but vaguely guessed at what it meant - yet they have dimly felt that the world was ennobled - and life took on a deeper meaning - when this great Son of God arose out of Galilee, - and the realization of their holiest - strongest - hopes has seemed less far - with the memory of his life & death written in their hearts. -

As the moon in her pathway, silently draws toward itself the waters of the great deep, - so the heart of man has unconsciously lifted itself up - whenever the life of Christ has shined upon it. - Upon us who can see more clearly why it should have this power, and whether it tends

how much easier may be its influence, -
It is not that he was the one only son of the living
God, - but the first - of many sons & daughters,
in whom the spirit of the most high - has, and
still is more fully to reveal itself, - because
the instincts of men have drawn them toward a
destiny common with him, - This is why the
Christian world has followed him though
blindly and afar off, - and why we with a
better trained and more penetrating vision
may find great hope and strength in his example, -

Then though others leave him, - murmuring
against his sayings, that they cannot be understood,
let us remain, to ponder his words of eternal
life, - and fortify our hope of heaven - by some
communion with him who coined all heaven
within his heart, - because he was a child
of the Father's righteousness.

